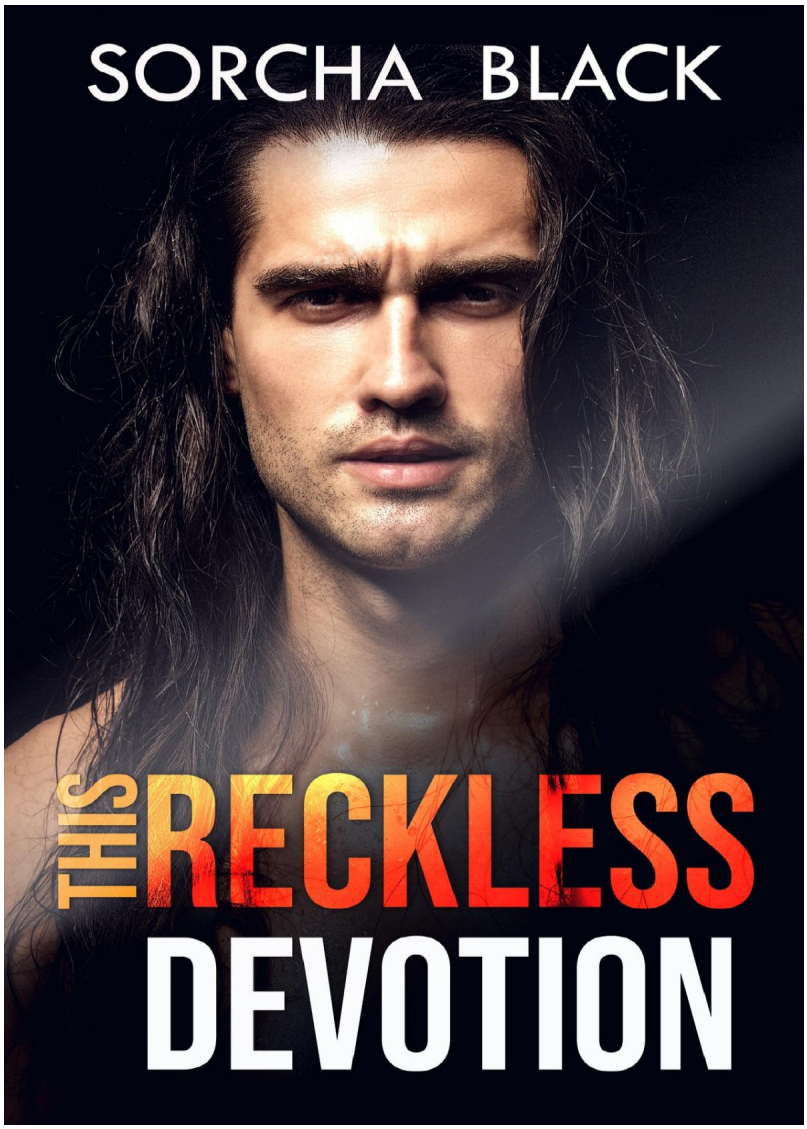
This Reckless Devotion: An MMF Bisexual Romance Sorcha Black pdf download

https://ebookmass.com/product/this-reckless-devotion-an-mmf-bisexual-romance-sorcha-black/

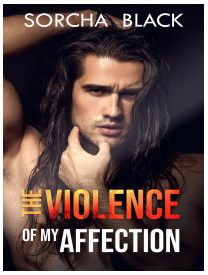


Explore and download more ebooks at ebookmass.com

We believe these products will be a great fit for you. Click the link to download now, or visit ebookmass.com to discover even more!

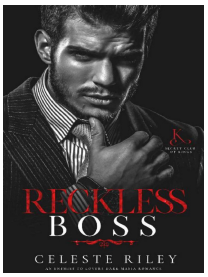
The Violence of My Affection: An Enemies to Lovers MMF Bisexual Romance Sorcha Black

https://ebookmass.com/product/the-violence-of-my-affection-an-enemies-to-lovers-mmf-bisexual-romance-sorcha-black/



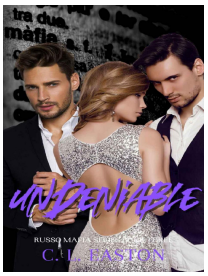
Reckless Boss: An Enemies to Lovers Dark Mafia Romance (Secret Club of Kings Book 3) Celeste Riley

https://ebookmass.com/product/reckless-boss-an-enemies-to-lovers-dark-mafia-romance-secret-club-of-kings-book-3-celeste-riley/



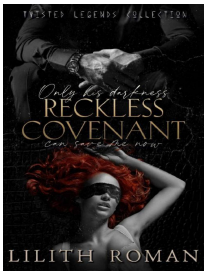
Undeniable : MMF Romance (Russo Mafia Series Book 3) C L Easton

https://ebookmass.com/product/undeniable-mmf-romance-russo-mafia-series-book-3-c-l-easton/



Reckless Covenant: a Second Chance Mafia Romance (Twisted Legends Collection Book 1) Lilith Roman

https://ebookmass.com/product/reckless-covenant-a-second-chance-mafia-romance-twisted-legends-collection-book-1-lilith-roman/

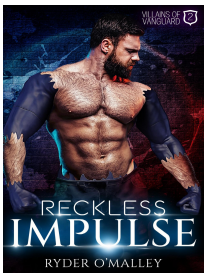


Future Like This: A Small Town Accidental Pregnancy Romance (Friends Like This Book 8) Bethany Monaco Smith

https://ebookmass.com/product/future-like-this-a-small-town-accidental-pregnancy-romance-friends-like-this-book-8-bethany-monaco-smith/

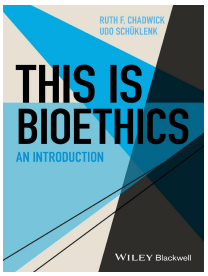
Reckless Impulse: A Steamy Fake Relationship MM Superhero Romance (Villains of Vanguard Book 2) Ryder O'Malley

https://ebookmass.com/product/reckless-impulse-a-steamy-fake-relationship-mm-superhero-romance-villains-of-vanguard-book-2-ryder-omalley/



This Is Bioethics: An Introduction Ruth F. Chadwick & Udo Schuklenk [Chadwick

https://ebookmass.com/product/this-is-bioethics-an-introduction-ruth-f-chadwick-udo-schuklenk-chadwick/

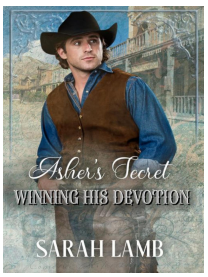


Stay this Christmas: A Sweet Small Town Romance (Magnolia Ridge Book 3) Genny Carrick

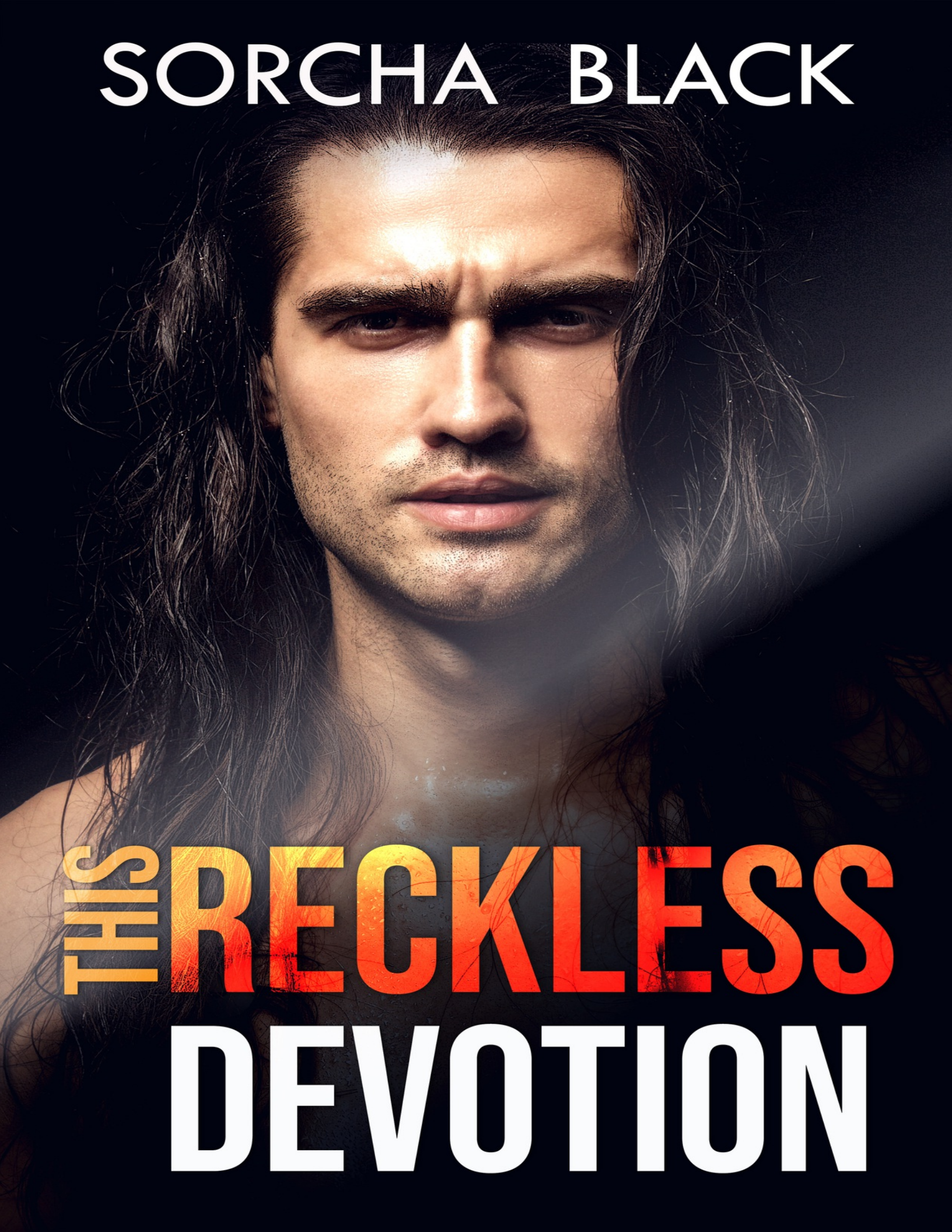
https://ebookmass.com/product/stay-this-christmas-a-sweet-small-town-romance-magnolia-ridge-book-3-genny-carrick/

Asher's Secret (Winning His Devotion Book 3) Sarah Lamb

https://ebookmass.com/product/ashers-secret-winning-his-devotion-book-3-sarah-lamb/



SORCHA BLACK



THIS RECKLESS DEVOTION

This Reckless Devotion

Sorcha Black

Belfry Publishing

Copyright © 2024 by Sorcha Black

All Rights Reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. This is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places and events in this book are fictional. Any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.

This book contains dark themes and rough scenes that may be disturbing to some readers. Visit www.sorchablack.com for more information. This book contains scenarios that should not be attempted or emulated.

Sign up for my newsletter here!

Cover

Cari Silverwood

Editor

Nerine Dorman

Contents

Chapter One: Loïc
Chapter Two: Loïc
Chapter Three: Tarryn
Chapter Four: Loïc
Chapter Five: Valor
Chapter Six: Valor
Chapter Seven: Tarryn
Chapter Eight: Valor
Chapter Nine: Valor
Chapter Ten: Loïc
Chapter Eleven: Loïc
Chapter Twelve: Tarryn
Chapter Thirteen: Loïc
Chapter Fourteen: Valor
Chapter Fifteen: Valor
Chapter Sixteen: Tarryn
Chapter Seventeen: Loïc
Chapter Eighteen: Loïc
Chapter Nineteen: Valor
Chapter Twenty: Tarryn

Chapter Twenty-One: Loïc
Chapter Twenty-Two: Loïc
Chapter Twenty-Three: Valor
Chapter Twenty-Four: Tarryn
Chapter Twenty-Five: Tarryn
Chapter Twenty-Six: Loïc
Chapter Twenty-Seven: Loïc
Chapter Twenty-Eight: Valor
Chapter Twenty-Nine: Tarryn
Chapter Thirty: Loïc
More from Sorcha Black

Chapter One: Loïc

Valor is everything I hate.
Everything I envy.
Everything I admire.
And now he is mine.

Loïc Leduc, Journal 15

"I carved my initials into his chest yesterday. Do you think it was too soon?"

My brother's home felt quiet with the bedtime routine done, other than Minnow reading the children a second book. Rodrigo was on an emergency work call, leaving only my brother and me, and a sedate fire in the fireplace. Even their four mutts were upstairs, never straying far from their mistress, if they had a choice.

Severin's study was one of my favorite rooms—cozy. Weirdly sophisticated, considering my beast of a brother.

Leaning back against the comfortable leather of the couch, I studied his stoic face, hoping for a hint of what he was thinking.

He lifted a dark brow. "I thought you hated the man."

"I changed my mind. I want to keep him."

I enjoyed spending time with Sev. He didn't judge me, rarely cracked a smile, and had the subterfuge of a Cro-Magnon. Growing up in Martine's realm had meant I'd had to learn to read people's mercurial moods, and pretend to be human to please her. Raised away from her, Severin had been spared all of that. He was the better man for it.

"When did you decide you were keeping him?"

"Right before I marked him as mine."

He ran his thumb over the arm seam of his chair. "Hard to say if it's too soon. How did he react when you did it?"

"He didn't stop me." I shrugged.

Severin nodded, mulling it over. "Well, if he didn't safeword that probably means he likes you."

I smiled, still feeling giddy. It was one thing for Tarryn to like me, but Valor had been the bane of my existence since I'd met them. Now? We'd have to work on things.

"Did you do aftercare?"

"I left him the stuff I got from Rodrigo and an instruction sheet."

Severin sighed. "No, not like that. You have to show him you care and that you value him. You can't do things like that and not hang around to make sure he's okay afterward."

Frowning, I tried to work out what that meant. "Like make him a coffee?"

"Something to drink is good. There's also hugging." Severin chewed his thoughts for a moment. "You could tell him he's a good boy."

My shoulders drew up of their own accord. That kind of thing made me queasy. "Hugging?"

"Hugging means a lot to most people." Severin looked as uncomfortable as I felt.

"But you don't hug Minnow and Rodrigo very often."

"I do when they need it. Sometimes it's nice. Lucky for me, they can also get that from each other, which gets me off the hook. With your two, they're both alone. You're the only one around to do it. If you don't take care of them, they can go into subdrop and feel horrible—even judge themselves harshly for enjoying what you do to them. Do you want them to feel terrible after you leave and dread you coming back?"

"Well…no."

He studied me. "It doesn't have to be hugging. You can…I don't know. Give them a bath? You have to let them know you care about them and value them."

"Makes sense." I'd have to look up some ideas. Hugging was fine when it was the children, but hugs from adults weirded me out. Cuddling, as a concept, made me shudder. Wanting someone to hang out in your personal space for an extended period of time? Touching you? Holding you there? Yuck. I felt claustrophobic just thinking about it. Although…having Tarryn on top of me was hot. She didn't make me feel trapped during sex, anyway.

"Now I need to claim Tarryn, and then maybe we can have what you have."

"Having what we have didn't happen overnight. Rodrigo and I knew each other for years and had a friendship to build on. You haven't known them that long, by comparison. Don't get frustrated if it takes extra time for the three of you to get to know each other. Things won't always go smoothly. Just don't give up." My brother looked me in the eye, which was about as much affection as he showed to any adult. "Just remember that by doing this, you're putting yourself in a position where they can hurt you worse than anyone you've ever met. Worse even than Martine."

"I can see how that would be true. I never loved Martine—not really."

"You were her possession. It's not the same as real love." He gave me a sympathetic smile. "Real love is knowing the other person can destroy you, and trusting them not to do it."

Minnow followed her belly into the room. The usual envy rose, but at least now I knew it was because this is what I wanted in life, and not that I actually wanted my brother's wife for myself.

She grinned when she saw me, which warmed my heart. She was always so kind and patient, but when she smiled like that, it was easy to see that she did it out of affection and not obligation.

I rose and went to greet her, holding her elbow and guiding her to a chair.

"You're almost as bad as your brother," she teased.

"You're precious, and you're carrying precious cargo. You can't blame your family for being protective."

She wrinkled her nose. "I don't want everyone thinking I'm fragile. I can still do most things. Maybe not the dishes soon, but that's only because my arms are getting too short to reach the sink past these two." She laid her hand on her stomach and gave me a wry smile.

Severin had gotten up when I had and hovered nearby until I was out of the way. As soon as I moved, he lifted her out of her chair, then installed her in his lap.

"Mister Leduc! I'm too big for this now," she complained.

"Nonsense."

He put his arms around her, and she looked inordinately pleased. It was probably his way of driving home his point from earlier, but the affection softening his normally brooding face told me he didn't only hold her because *she* wanted it. Obviously, he got something from it, too.

"They're kicking," Minnow told me. "Do you want to feel?"

I nodded eagerly. The last time she'd offered had been months ago, and I would never risk making her uncomfortable by asking. Although she'd made it clear that our history was water under the bridge, I tried to be careful.

"Over here." She took my hand and guided it to one side of her belly. A moment later, one of her babies bumped my hand. Not a flutter like the last time, but the slide of a knee or foot that felt like it was just on the other side of her skin.

"Amazing." I waited and was rewarded with another hard bump before I pulled away my hand. I didn't know how long to stand there with my hand on her belly before things became awkward. "How's their bedroom coming along?"

"Almost done. The dressers came in, and the mural is almost finished."

I'd helped her trace out the huge, sleepy dragon, but she'd done most of the painting herself. It had been coming along

beautifully the last time I'd seen it.

"After that, I only have to take the newborn clothes out of storage and wash them."

"I'll wash them," my brother said immediately. "I'll even let you correct my folding technique."

She laughed. "You're good at folding now."

"You know," he drawled, a hint of mischief in his eyes. "I watched a YouTube video the other day that said rolling things in a ball keeps them from getting wrinkled."

"Not the way you used to do it."

They slanted sly smiles at each other the way they always did when they were teasing. It was delightful torture to watch. It made me miss Tarryn with a horrible ache. My interactions with Valor were a bit more…barbed.

"Did I miss anything interesting while I was reading to Prospero and Concordia?" Minnow asked.

"Loïc marked Valor as his."

She glanced from Sev to me, brows raised. "Really?"

I nodded, my neck and cheeks prickling with heat.

"I didn't realize things had progressed that far." She frowned. "I really wish you would carry your phone more. It's so hard to get a hold of you. We never know where you are lately."

"Loïc belongs to himself. He doesn't owe us communication. He doesn't answer to us."

She waved her hand. "I didn't mean it like that. Most families stay in touch if they like each other. It's not about restricting someone's activity."

"Oh." Severin lowered his brows in contemplation. "You're asking about the phone because we love him and want to make sure he's okay."

"Yes, exactly." She smiled at me in the way that always made me see she cared about me the way she cared about the other members of the family. It was different than how she loved my brother, their husband, and their children, but strongly all the same.

"I've been carrying my phone more often, but sometimes I forget."

"That's fair. I'd forget my head if it wasn't attached to my shoulders lately. Thank you for trying to remember."

"Will you text me when it's time for the babies to come?"

She looked pleased. "Of course."

"I'd like to come to the clinic to wait, if that's not uncomfortable for you—just to be near when our new family members join us." I hadn't been welcome in the family when Prospero was born, and I'd accidentally missed Concordia's birth while traveling around Australia for two months.

"Absolutely!" Minnow looked ecstatic.

Severin's silver-blue eyes crinkled at the corners, and he gave me a nod of approval.

Let people know I cared about them.

I could do that.

How hard could it be?

Chapter Two: Loïc

Tarryn is a reflection of all that is good in the world.
Every bright thought.
Every tender feeling.

Loïc Leduc, Journal 15

Far below the balcony, the occasional car trundled down the deserted, lamp-lit street. Wind tugged playfully at my clothes, drying my sweat. I'd never climbed quite so high before, but it needed to be done.

As usual, the drapes weren't closed. Who would bother closing the curtains when they lived so high up? None of the surrounding buildings were quite as tall, giving every floor above the fourth a feeling of relative privacy.

The sliding patio door was locked, which pleased me, and even when I unlocked it, the thing wouldn't budge, meaning she had a bar in the track to keep it shut.

Good girl.

The window next to it was not locked, however, so I slid through and climbed onto the loveseat. The apartment was so familiar now that the dimness wasn't disorienting. Light from the city had a way of creeping into almost any room with a window.

My boots made no sound as I found my way into the bedroom. In the warmth of the apartment, she'd thrown off her blanket and sheet, leaving her vulnerable.

If she'd been standing, her nightshirt would probably reach her knee, but in sleep it barely covered the top of her thighs. Little flowers were scattered across the pale fabric.

My woman was so very beautiful. I didn't deserve her.

But…

Instead of a monster under her bed, she had me.

How could anyone expect me to give her up and look for someone else? No other woman would intrigue me as she did—her sense of humor, the way she laughed, the quality of her mind. The soft curve of her lips, which was my reward when she found

me amusing. The shine in her eyes when I brought her delight. I could happily spend my life studying her every expression.

If it wasn't for her husband, we could have had a long, happy life together.

The fact that she was still in love with him, despite everything I'd done to divide them, rankled.

At least now she was also in love with me. At least, it seemed like she was. She hadn't said the words.

I watched her sleep, loath to wake her, and yet the compulsion to touch her was as strong as it had been the first night we'd met.

The whole point of entering by the window, instead of letting myself in through her door, was to assess her safety. Now that I was in? Interesting, nefarious thoughts crowded into my head.

Her chest rose and fell in a deep, slow rhythm. My arrival hadn't disturbed her. A bottle of pills and glass of water on her nightstand suggested she'd medicated herself to sleep. She never seemed to need those when I was with her—or maybe she didn't trust me enough to take them when she knew I was around?

That she took them when she was alone was far too trusting, in my opinion. A creepy man with vile intentions could sneak in and touch her.

The thought of a stranger doing so made me want to slit someone's throat. Hell, I had a hard time dealing with the way men gawked at her on the street, not that she paid them any attention. The catcalls were incessant. How had she stayed safe so long on her own?

She sighed, her breasts in danger of spilling out of the scoop-necked nightshirt. In her sleep, she squeezed her thighs together, then murmured and rolled to her belly. The movement shifted the nightshirt higher, twisting slightly and rising almost to her waist. Beneath it, she wore a pair of simple cotton panties that were anything but erotic, and yet more erotic because they weren't. In lingerie she would be breathtaking—beautiful and waiting to be fucked. But like this? Mussed…unaware. She didn't know I was here. She hadn't put this on with the anticipation of being seen in it.

That made everything more forbidden. More delicious.

She shifted, trying to get comfortable. I longed to stretch out on top of her—to murmur in her ear and grind against her ass, and let her know she wasn't alone. But she didn't sleep enough, and it seemed cruel to wake her on her day off to slake my selfish desire for her.

I found her phone, unlocked it with her PIN, then set up the camera to record. Although I didn't plan to take things any further, almost anything could be used to make Valor jealous.

My cock strained against the confines of my jeans, eager to plunge into the hot grip of her pussy. The room smelled like her soap and may be a little like lust, although the latter might have been my sexually frustrated imagination. She shifted again, squirming her ass from side to side as she attempted to settle, or maybe take the edge off whatever she was dreaming about.

I palmed my hard-on, wondering if it would be completely unacceptable for her to wake up to the sight of me with my cock in my hand. Maybe I shouldn't have been fantasizing about her the whole flight over, but it was difficult not to, after being gone so long.

Tarryn wouldn't hesitate to show me more if I asked, right?

She'd forgive me for looking my fill.

Cautiously, I slid her underwear lower, my gaze moving from the now exposed dimples at the bottom of her back, to her sleep-smoothed face, watching to make sure I didn't disturb her rest. I drew her panties down her thighs, wondering if she'd be offended.

I caressed the round curve of her backside with my gaze. I considered leaving her panties around her knees, but her body fretted at the way her legs were caught together, so I drew them off completely, careful not to let the tag tickle her feet.

The amount of light coming from the window left too much to my imagination, so I moved silently to the hallway and flipped on the light, knowing it wouldn't shine in her eyes from this angle. When I returned to her room, she was still sleeping peacefully, motionless, beautiful, vulnerable, nude from the waist down. Her legs were slightly parted, relaxed.

Gingerly, I sat on the bed next to her, trying to be satisfied, but my dick begged for more. I unbuttoned my jeans, then unzipped them carefully, one tooth at a time, the sound loud in the silence of the room.

I shifted her closest leg closer still, bending her knee, giving myself a less obstructed view. I caught my breath of the sight of her bare, unguarded sex. I wanted to touch her there, maybe kiss her. The swells of her ass cheeks made my cock twitch, and the tight pucker of her asshole tempted me.

There wasn't a part of her I wouldn't love to touch, to taste, to use.

I wrapped a hand around my now aching cock, aware of how forbidden it was to interfere with her while she slept. We'd joked about this—and I'd gotten the impression she was into it. Besides, she was mine. Would it be wrong for me to explore her nakedness if she didn't even know I was doing it?

She moved again, and I froze. Her brow furrowed, troubled. She made a peevish sound, murmured something I couldn't hear, then rolled to her back again, bumping me with her leg.

Her breathing settled. Was I disappointed or excited she'd stayed asleep?

Tiny rose-shaped buttons held the pale pink sleep shirt together. The swell of her breasts put a strain on the buttons, and I

Visit https://ebookmass.com today to explore

a vast collection of ebooks across various genres, available in popular formats like PDF, EPUB, and MOBI, fully compatible with all devices. Enjoy a seamless reading experience and effortlessly download high-quality materials in just a few simple steps. Plus, don’t miss out on exciting offers that let you access a wealth of knowledge at the best prices!

groaned quietly, unable to stop myself from brushing my fingers over them. How was a mere mortal supposed to resist the temptation of unfastening the sweet little buttons to reveal the beautiful flesh beneath? I fought with myself for a few moments before finally giving in—I would only loosen a few, expose more cleavage.

With each button I unfastened came a new excuse to go farther, until I could brush aside the cotton fabric and expose her naked breasts to my hungry gaze. There was barely enough light to properly appreciate the rosy tips of her breasts. They were so soft and perfect against my fingertips, and the silver hoops piercing them urged me to flick and tug.

Precum leaked from my painful erection as I took her pretty nipples between my fingers, then gently pinched them until they were hard peaks. I tried to stop myself, but my lips needed to feel their softness, skin against skin, and I allowed myself to graze my lips carefully over the sensitive flesh, and then of course it was only a matter of moments before her nipple was in my mouth.

I sucked carefully, alert to every change in her breathing even though my own was loud in my ears. Maybe it was strange to toy with her breasts for my own pleasure rather than hers, but there was no one in the room to judge me. I played with them with my mouth and tongue until they were rosy and sensual in the soft light, the gleam of my saliva enhancing the color. I stroked my cock a few more times, taking some of my precum and wiping it on her soft mouth. Such a pretty mouth. Briefly, I considered masturbating into it, but no. I gripped my balls, not ready to finish this illicit exploration.

Damn. Her thighs were parted.

How was I supposed to resist doing more?

I sat back for a moment, admiring her, taking in the tumble of her hair, the opened shirt with her beautiful breasts spilling out, her naked pussy on display, like an invitation to take what I wanted.

I ran my fingers along her inner thigh, the silken feel of her skin making my dick bob. I swept my index finger over the copious amounts of precum leaking from my cock, gritting my teeth against the frustrating pleasure it brought, then moved my fingers between her thighs. I spread her labia, exposing her slit to the warm air of the room. Moisture glistened at her opening, as though her body was alert to what I was doing even though her brain slept on. I daubed the slickness from my cock against her clit hood, using it to lubricate the slide of my fingers over the little nub. Her clit hood piercing made me feel feral, as it always had.

Her body was reacting to me, even though she was unaware of my presence.

Why was touching her while she slept so achingly hot?

I rubbed her clit hood with gentle, teasing strokes, gathering more of my precum to keep my fingers slick. She shifted and quietly whimpered in her sleep. More moisture gathered at her entrance, then trickled, making me desperate for relief.

Fuck. Just imagining easing into her while she slept made my cock throb dangerously. I imagined her waking up in the middle of it—or maybe only waking up much later, sore and sticky and confused. Which would be better?

I lowered myself between her thighs, then dragged my tongue through the liquid approval her body offered. She tasted tart and smelled like heaven. I explored every inch of her sweet pussy, tasting, stroking. When I licked lower, her body shuddered. She mumbled something, and I froze in place, my tongue still on her, but she didn't wake or push me away.

Feral for her, I stood and pushed my jeans lower, then moved over her, trying not to jostle the bed. Gently, I touched the weeping head of my cock to her slit, the warmth and dampness making me bite back a groan. It would take a saint to deny himself now, and no one would ever be silly enough to canonize someone like me.

Just a bit of penetration, and then I'd stop.

The touch of my cock head to her pussy made me shudder in anticipation. I dragged my dick up and down her opening, using my precum to make her body slicker. Carefully, I coaxed the head of my cock into her slippery warmth, bit by bit, shaking with the effort of not plunging fast and deep. I moved my hand on my shaft, stroking lightly, masturbating into her body. With curious fingers, I traced where we were joined, amazed her tiny pussy could be stuffed so full.

She mumbled in her sleep.

"Do you like that, princess?" I whispered. "Your hot little pussy is drooling for more, but I should probably stop." My voice had begun to shake, and I struggled to control my breathing.

Her pussy fluttered around me, as though urging me deeper.

What gentleman would refuse an invitation like that?

No, Loïc. Stop.

But Loïc didn't want to stop.

Loïc wanted to fill his woman's needy pussy full of cum—to prop up her legs so none of his seed escaped her—to feed any that spilled out back into her.

I tried to bargain with my animal brain, that desperately wanted her heat, her warmth. And also…

Progeny.

Pull out.

I did not.

You may stir your hips once, then you must stop.

I meant to, but the biological imperative was insistent. I kept going, my movements so small, shallow, and slow, it was torture.

Do you want her to refuse to see you again?

Would she, though? She rarely did more than gently scold when I crossed the line. Somewhere in her beautiful mind, she had limits, but they rarely applied to me.

I eased my cock deeper, groaning silently at the hot grip of her. A few real strokes wouldn't be much worse than what I'd already done, and she was still sound asleep.

One.

Two.

Ah fuuuck.

Three.

I reached between us and ran a finger over her piercing, making her shudder. She stretched, squirmed. I stilled, holding my breath. Dreaming, she whimpered.

"That's right, sweet girl," I breathed in her ear. "Are you dreaming of this cock filling you up? Maybe we'll start a baby in your pretty belly, and you won't even remember it happening."

I hissed as my cock bucked. So fucking close, but I wasn't ready for this to be over. I'd been lying to myself when I'd thought I'd be able to stop.

Slowly, I slid hilt-deep inside her, my balls drawing up with the need to spill. Her body was lax—her face serene and composed. I pulled partway out then eased back in, reveling in the sight of her dishabille, and the squeeze of her body around my cock. Her lips were parted in sleep, and I let saliva pool in my mouth, then drip down into hers, feeding her my spit. She swallowed convulsively, her soft mouth pink and wet.

"There's my good girl." I licked her bottom lip, then kissed her unresponsive mouth like the weirdest of creeps.

My hips found a gentle rhythm that gradually picked up pace as my control slipped. Her body was limp and pliant under mine, and I couldn't help but gather her to me and slide in as deep as she could take me, as I got closer to the edge.

Her breasts trembled with each careful thrust, their rose tips glinting with the cruel metal rings she wore in them.

At any moment she'd wake, but for now she was a marionette with no puppeteer—a beautiful doll to fill with my lust. *La belle au bois dormant*. I would be the villain in her story, taking what I wanted instead of a chaste kiss. The evil prince who would visit every night to admire, taste, touch, fill her up…then watch in rapt fascination as her belly swelled with the life I put inside her.

"Fuck," I groaned. "Do you want my cum, *ma jolie*? I can't hold back any longer."

No answer passed her lips. Her brow was smooth, still unaware she was being fucked. Her mind was far away.

My orgasm refused to obey me any longer, straining at the base of my cock until it broke my control, bursting from me with such violence that I sobbed. The sound echoed in the room, loud and humiliating, but I was too far gone to care. I pumped into her again and again, the pleasure almost too much to bear. When the storm had ebbed to after shudders, I held myself deep inside her pussy, and I could have sworn it rippled around me. She gave a fitful snore and mumbled something. I laughed silently, surprised she'd slept through all of it.

Carefully, I pulled out, trying not to waste my gift to her. I slid a pillow under her bottom, hoping to keep my seed where it would do the most good. Awkwardly, I shifted off her and checked, finding some of my cum sliding from her pretty pussy. I scooped it with my fingers and pushed it back in, enjoying how slick I'd made her and the sight of her brimming with my claim on her.

A possessive bliss settled over me.

I rested my head on her chest, listening to the steady beat of her heart. Unable to resist, I suckled her nipple until it was rosy and sore looking, then did the same to the other.

Sleep tried to drag me down. Relaxed, sated, I wished I could curl up with her and let it happen. I cuddled her to me, finding it nicer than I'd expected. The fact that she was asleep made it easier. Maybe I'd try it again sometime soon.

Tonight, though, I had other plans.

I fetched my backpack.

My excitement helped me shake off sleep's clinging tendrils.

If fucking her hadn't woken her, I doubted this would.

"I love you, Tarryn."

She couldn't answer, but I knew she loved me, too.

Chapter Three: Tarryn

The piercing shrill of my alarm had to work through several layers of muddiness until my brain registered that it was time to wake up. I lay there momentarily, cursing the fact that I was an adult who needed to get out of bed. It didn't seem to matter how much I loved my job, I was not and never had been a morning person. The sleep meds didn't help.

As my brain came back online, I pushed up to sit on the edge of my bed and sighed in disgruntled irritation.

What was that smell? Was that coffee? I yawned, wishing it was, but knowing my imagination was playing tricks on me. I slid off my too high mattress onto the floor. Why was the inside of my hip so itchy? I tried to scratch, and found something in the way. What on earth? I lifted my sleep shirt and peered down to find a bandage taped to the inside of my hip.

Hadn't I worn panties to bed?

One person came immediately to mind.

"Loïc?" I asked hesitantly, my voice coming out louder than I'd anticipated...maybe a bit hysterical.

"You're finally awake!" The man in question stepped into the room and flashed me a smile so dazzling it made my stomach flip-flop. He handed me a coffee and urged me back into bed. I sniffed at it, but I shouldn't have worried. Even when I wasn't sure what I wanted, he seemed to know what I would have chosen. "I went to that coffee shop you like."

I set the coffee aside. "When did you get here?" I demanded.

He pouted at me, and his French accent became sulky. "Are you not happy to see Loïc?"

I glared at him. "What is this?" I poked at the suspicious bandage and started trying to peel at the edge, but he pushed my hand away.

"Leave it alone. It'll heal better if it stays wrapped for a little while."

Liquid trickled from my pussy, interrupting that line of questioning.

What…the fuck.

He didn't. He wouldn't.

I was sore inside—I'd been so surprised to see him, I hadn't realized it, at first.

Horror made my knees feel hollow, but then my pussy twitched, and my face flushed.

"What did you do to me while I was sleeping?"

"Oh, that. I only meant to play, but your body became very insistent. I gave it what it wanted—I think you even had an orgasm. If you don't remember I'll gladly give you another one now." He set his coffee aside and crawled over me, then rubbed his nose against mine.

Was he saying he'd fucked me while I was asleep?

I…

He'd helped himself to my body while my mind had been elsewhere?

"You can't fuck someone while they're sleeping!"

"But you told me it was one of your fantasies."

"No, I didn't! We joked about it. That's different."

His silvery blue eyes went wide width alarm. "I'm sorry. I thought you were asking me to do it to you sometime, and the idea intrigued me. I enjoyed taking my time, exploring your body."

A fleeting remembrance of lust crossed his expression. I had to tamp down the unfortunate arousal it dredged up. This was fucked. I should be pissed—yelling, demanding he leave. Maybe calling the police.

But this was Loïc.

Did he even know any better?

Was I actually angry?

I sighed. "From now on you need to negotiate these things with me ahead of time, okay?"

He kissed me and groaned, settling between my thighs. I felt like I should rush to the bathroom to brush my teeth before I let him kiss me any deeper. I licked my lips when he pulled away and realized whatever was crusted at the corner of my mouth didn't taste like dried saliva. I swiped at it with the back of my hand.

"Just how much fun did you have with me while I was sleeping?"

"I filmed it with your phone in case you wanted to watch."

"All of my pictures and videos upload to my cloud storage," I protested.

"I know."

"I share that cloud with Valor."

"I know that, too. I texted him to let him know I'd left him a gift."

Beneath him, I shuddered. I let him kiss me again, even though I probably shouldn't have.

He rolled off me and handed me my coffee again.

"You need to be ready soon. I'll leave so you can take a shower in peace. I'm sure you need one." His self-assured wink was ridiculously sexy, and I rubbed my thighs together. If my body did somehow have an orgasm while I was sleeping, it was ready for another one.

But no, I needed to hurry, or I was going to be very late for the meeting with my agent.

I carried my coffee to the bathroom and caught sight of the bandage again. It almost looked like plastic wrap.

"Loïc, what on earth did you do to the inside of my hip?" I called from the bathroom. He appeared in the doorway smiling, as though he'd been waiting for the question.

"Just a small tattoo." He held up his thumb and forefinger about an inch apart.

Aghast, I gawped at him.

"Don't worry, my brother-in-law showed me how to do it safely. He tattoos my brother all the time."

"Oh my god." I picked at the edge of the bandage as he discouraged me, but he didn't stop me from unwrapping it this time. The black ink looked stark against my freckled skin. In the mirror it was backward, but the elegantly looped script was clear.

LL

He'd fucking monogrammed me!

He wrapped his arms around me from behind and gave me an awkward, reassuring squeeze. "Just my initials," he whispered in my ear. "I made them small and pretty, see?" He dragged his finger in a circle around the spot that felt the way raw hamburger probably would feel if it was still sentient. I shuddered as he nibbled on my earlobe. His hard cock was slotted against my spine. "I had to make sure people know you're mine."

I needed to be protesting, but his gaze in the mirror…his deep voice in my ear…my clit throbbed so hard my mind went completely blank.

His hand slipped down to the hem of my night shirt, then delved between my legs to toggle my clit hood piercing. He slid one of his long, elegant fingers into me and stroked my clit with this thumb. I whimpered.

"You don't mind, do you?"

Mind? He could do this all day, and I would never mind.

Oh, the tattoo. Shit. Valor would be pissed, but it was too late now. I didn't even have any other tattoos. It felt very taboo to have a man's mark of ownership on me—especially when he wasn't my husband.

"You should have asked first," I admonished. There was no bite in the statement, though. He was keeping me far too distracted to think hard about it. His mouth was open against the back of my neck, his breath hot.

He groaned. "Such a mess I made in this pretty little cunt."

I gasped, and my pussy twitched and fluttered around his finger. He really had fucked me—actually fucked me—while I was sleeping.

"Valor is going to be really angry."

"What is it Americans say? You snooze, you lose? If anything, you should be angry with *him* for not marking you as his years ago."

His gaze was wild, possessive. I looked to the mark of ownership he'd made in my flesh, and couldn't help but squirm against his hand. Apparently, an absolute parade of red flags was totally my kink.

"You're so toxic." The accusation was breathy instead of cutting.

"Maybe, but only in the fun way." He pulled his finger out of me, and before I could object to its loss, he sat me on the bathroom counter. "Are you sore?"

"Yes, and I don't even remember any of it."

He *tsk*ed and crouched between my thighs. "You are red, poor thing. Can I kiss it better?"

"Well…if you insist." I said, trying to be flippant. "I…I—"

His mouth—ugh, his evil, sexy mouth—was on me before I could finish my thought, and then I had no thoughts at all, other than to clutch the counter so I didn't tumble off.

"I need to get ready for my meeting," I protested.

He dug his fingers into the tender flesh of my legs, protesting my anticipated attempt at escape. My body refused to let me interrupt him.

I threaded my fingers through his silky hair, envying the smooth dark waterfall of it and admiring his thick dark lashes. How could such a beautiful man be obsessed with me like this? It was like having a force of nature fall in love with you.

Was it love?

Right then, I didn't care.

He urged my body to take two of his fingers as his mouth fastened ruthlessly down on my clit. Hot tension filled my body, threatening to make me explode before I'd had much time to enjoy it.

I pressed my palm against his forehead, urging him to slow down. He broke the suction on my clit and tortured me with his tongue, keeping me overwhelmed as he pumped fingers curved deliciously inside me.

The tension in the back of my legs and my lower belly became unbearable, and I whimpered and squirmed against his face until he chuckled. His hum of pleasure made me gasp and clutch at his hair.

"Be a good girl." His tone was gently mocking as he pulled his fingers out of me then pushed my knees back until I was leaning on the mirror.

"What are you...?"

He dipped his tongue lower, teasing at the very bottom of my pussy, then straying to my perineum.

I meant to say something, but I gasped then couldn't do more than squeak as his tongue strayed lower still, stroking over my back hole without the slightest hesitation.

The sensation made me squeal and try to squirm away, but he wouldn't allow it. He rubbed my clit with his fingers and licked parts of me I didn't want to think about as I panted and whined.

"Loïc, please!"

"What would you like, *ma jolie*?"

"Please fuck me."

"No."

I whined in dismay as he pulled away and left me hanging.

Confused, I slid off the counter and peered up at him, tugging at his T-shirt and probably looking pathetic.

"But why not?" When had my voice gone so high-pitched? My whole body felt over-wrought and buzzed with frustration.

"You're going to be late for the meeting with your agent."

How did he know who my meeting was with? It was Loïc…he always knew.

"Please, Loïc. It won't take me long to come, I promise."

He walked into the bedroom and sat in the overstuffed armchair where I liked to read. Hesitantly, I followed him.

"I'm trying not to be a distraction," he said innocently.

"It's too late for that."

Desperately, I knelt at his feet, ready to beg. I was so used to begging Valor for what I wanted it had been a natural reaction, but once I was there, I realized I'd never had to beg Loïc for anything. My face heated.

He brought his fingers to my chin and tipped my face toward his. "What are you doing down there?"

"Please?"

"I don't want to be responsible for making you late, but if you're choosing to be late, you're welcome to take what you want, woman."

Fingers fumbling, I unbuttoned his jeans, but I needed his help to free his cock. The thing was much more intimidating at close quarters. I'd watched Valor go down on him several times, but strangely, I'd never done it myself.

I leaned in and swirled my tongue over its thick head, then sucked it greedily into my mouth. It was an uncomfortable fit, and

I had a difficult time doing it justice since dislocating my jaw to accommodate him wasn't working. He didn't seem to mind my struggle, though, and he gasped and twisted beneath me in a way that stroked my ego. It was odd, sucking cock without my partner controlling me. I found myself playing, making him sloppy, taking my time, learning what he liked. His every gasp turned me on, making the ache in my lower belly so bad I couldn't wait any longer.

I pulled off him, not caring that a strand of drool still connected his cock to my lips.

"Fuuuck." His tortured groan was so erotic my pussy shuddered in a mini orgasm. He gasped for breath, chest heaving, his eyes half-lidded and hazy. His dick strained against his belly, looking downright furious at having been interrupted. He dug his fingers into the arms of the chair, like it required everything he had to control himself.

He pushed up from the chair, and I crab-walked backward.

"Where do you think you're going?" His voice was low and rough, and I blinked up at him, not used to seeing this side of his personality.

I scrambled to my feet, regarding him uncertainly, so overwhelmed by lust I couldn't think straight.

"Don't you fucking run from me."

Running hadn't crossed my mind, but now it sounded like a good idea. I backed a step.

"Tarryn," he warned.

"Loïc." I let his name roll off my tongue like a challenge.

"I don't want to hurt you."

He stepped toward me and I stepped back. Frowning, he tucked his cock into his pants and zipped them.

I turned and ran, fully aware I couldn't go far. My apartment wasn't big, and I was completely naked, so there was no heading out into the hallway.

Laughing, I led him on a chase around the living room, the kitchen, then back to the living room. Could I get to my trench coat fast enough to take it out the door with me? What were the chances someone would be in the hall in the second it would take me to pull my coat on?

I'd swiped the coat off the rack and had a hand on the doorhandle when he caught me and swung me around to face him. He was making a weird growling sound, and his pale eyes were absolutely menacing.

"You can't get away from me, Tarryn. I won't allow it."

He slammed me against the door hard enough to make me gasp. Between us, he freed himself from his jeans and before I could protest, he'd pinned me to the door and slid me upward, getting between my thighs.

For a moment, he stared into my eyes, gulping air. He was shaking with adrenaline, and barely seemed able to contain himself. Jaw flexing, he lined himself up with my pussy and shoved his way inside, not taking his time the way he usually did. He was big enough to make it hurt, but I was so wet my body figured out how to take him—at least until he hit my cervix, and I yelped. He held me in place, his thumbs digging into my hips, one of them right into my fresh tattoo.

Fuck, I'd almost forgotten he'd tattooed me. I knew he was a little twisted, but tattooing me without my permission was going too far.

"Whose pussy is this?" he demanded.

"Mine."

He pulled out and thrust back in hard enough to make me squeak. "Whose fucking pussy is this, Tarryn?"

"Valor's," I snapped.

He went completely wild, fucking me into the door as I clutched at his shoulders, squealing and struggling, trying to avoid his punishing teeth. He kept biting me, and filling the apartment with French swears. Holding me tight, he walked us over to the couch and threw me down, pulling out long enough to kick my coffee table out of his way before he was on me again.

Instinctively, I fought his attempt to get back between my thighs, swearing at him. He grabbed my wrists in one hand, and pried my knees apart with the other. After that, it didn't take much for him to force his hips between my thighs.

He stopped dead. "Ghost pepper."

I blinked at him in confusion for a moment. Oh, right. The safeword.

He was safewording?

He pulled away and got to his feet. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

"Are you okay?" I asked. It felt weird checking on him, considering the circumstances. Valor had never safeworded with me before. If he didn't want to do something, he just didn't do it.

"Did I go too far? Did I hurt you?" There was real fear in his eyes. "You looked so scared."

"I'm okay. I know I have a safeword."

He was shuddering. "I think I liked it too much. I like it when you're scared. I like to hurt you." French started pouring from his mouth, but he wasn't speaking to me.

Someone banged on the door.

Startled, my gaze flew to it.

"Go to the bedroom, Loïc."

He didn’t move. I wasn’t sure he could hear me.

I retrieved my trench coat from the floor and put it on, then cracked open the door, hoping the person wouldn’t be able to see inside.

My neighbor from across the hall was staring at me, brows raised so high it looked like they might never come back down.

“You are okay?” she whispered in broken English. She was dressed for work, but only had eyeshadow on one eye.

“Sorry.” I felt my face go horribly red. “My friend had a night terror.”

“Oh.” She looked skeptical and hesitated, studying my expression, maybe waiting for a sign that I was being held hostage.

“Everything’s fine, Agata. Thanks for checking on me.” I gave her an apologetic smile.

She dropped her voice to an almost inaudible whisper. “You need me to call the *policie*?”

“No, no,” I whispered back. “He’s awake now and very embarrassed.”

She smiled, looking relieved. I’d have to remember to send her a thank-you gift. It was brave of her to come to the door.

“Thank you for checking on me. I’m sorry for disturbing you.”

She waved a hand. “Is nothing.”

“Have a good day.”

She smiled and headed back into her apartment. I closed the door and turned back to look at Loïc.

He wasn’t in the living room anymore.

“Loïc?”

Nothing.

The apartment was empty.

He was gone.

Worried, I waited a while, but then focused on getting cleaned up.

Like a stray cat, he'd come back when he felt like it.

Chapter Four: Loïc

Nightmares burrow in the wings of sleep—a parasite no knife can excise.
Sleep not, Loïc. You know what comes of it.

Loïc Leduc, Journal 15

Martine was frowning.

"Can I be of service?"

"What do you think, stupid boy?"

She was so perfect—so beautiful. I went to her and knelt as she hauled up her skirt, knowing better than to argue. Things always went bad for me when I argued.

As I serviced her, she made calls, all but ignoring me. I tried harder, tongue sore, jaw hurting.

Her breathing altered for a moment, then she pushed me away, finished with me for now.

"A new client will be here in an hour."

I nodded, although she didn't bother looking my way. Her taste and smell were smeared across my face, but I knew better than to wipe it on my sleeve. The last thing I wanted today was a beating on top of the bruises she'd left yesterday.

At the door, I hesitated, hoping she would look up—maybe make eye contact.

Nothing.

At least I'd been useful.

I padded down the hall to the bedroom she let me use sometimes, avoiding the servants, not looking anyone in the eye. Everyone knew better than to notice me—it was the fastest way to get fired.

Had I not used my tongue enough? Had the suction been lacking?

I racked my brain, analyzing everything I'd done, trying to imagine things from her perspective so I could make it better. Once, last month, she'd put a hand to my hair. It had felt almost affectionate, but I hadn't managed to earn it again.

Stupid, stupid boy.

I showered, then brushed my teeth and hair. Carefully, I chose from the outfits in the closet, putting on the one I had guessed

was her favorite. Everything in my closet was grim. Maybe one day she would like me more and I could ask for a brighter color—or an accessory. Maybe if I did a good job today, she'd smile, even if it wasn't at me.

The grand salon was empty when I arrived, thank god. I poured Martine's wine and waited by the sideboard, ready to serve drinks, sit on laps, suck dicks—whatever she wanted me to do.

Something was hurting my ears.

I blinked away the memory and found the food burning. The smoke alarm was emitting an ear-splitting warning.

"Stupid, stupid boy," Martine's voice said in my head.

"She's dead. Stop letting her control your life," Jack's voice in my head retorted.

"Loïc!" Tarryn's voice cut through the discordant brass band of my jumbled thoughts.

The angel's brilliant white halo framed her tousled red curls—so much beauty and kindness, it was hard to look at directly. Warmth radiated from her smile. Reassurance.

"Loïc? Are you okay?" She shut off the stove and moved the frying pan to a different burner. The smoke alarm was stabbing my ears. She shut it off and immediately came back.

"Did I ruin another pan?" I croaked.

Why was I on the floor? I was wedged in the corner with my back against the cupboards.

"Did you burn yourself?" She took my wrists in her small hands and inspected me, a small crease of worry between her brows.

Emotion welled in my throat, and I pulled my hands back like she was what might burn me.

What if my mind lured me away someday, and I accidentally hurt her? My head was like a nightmare-fueled fairyland—when I came back, I never knew how long I'd been gone.

I could have burned down the apartment with her in it.

Jesus.

"Stupid, stupid boy," I murmured to myself.

"What?"

"I'm so sorry. I—I got distracted."

"It happens."

"Maybe I'll stick to apologizing with takeout instead of trying to cook. I'm not good at it anyway."

"You *are* good at it! You didn't even know how to turn the element on when we met, and now look at you. Maybe if you want to cook, you can wait until I'm with you? I can be your sous chef, and I can shut things off if there's a distraction." She cupped my face in her hands and kissed my forehead. My eyes burned and blurred.

"Don't," I managed to choke out.

Reluctantly, she let go, but I still felt the lingering warmth of her touch on me, banishing Martine to hell.

"I need to call Valor, and I need to finish my shower." I hadn't even realized she was in a towel. "I'm glad you came back."

"I'm sorry I left instead of making sure you were okay," I whispered, not trusting my voice. "I needed space to calm down."

"We can talk about it or not. It's up to you." She stood in the doorway. Was she hoping I would look at her? "Coming?"

Collecting myself, I stood and pushed my hair back from my face.

"Absolutely." Mocking Valor on a video call while I groped his wife was one of my favorite games in the world.

"So, you really did record what you did to me last night?"

"Yes."

She gave an adorably aggravated grumble. "What am I going to do with you?"

I winked at her, feeling more like myself again. "Absolutely anything you'd like."

Chapter Five: Valor

[Chaos] I sent you a gift. Check your cloud

[Nymph] He's here again. You might want to call me before you watch what he sent you

Missed call from Tarryn

Shit.

Although I'd been home, I'd been so engrossed in work, I hadn't heard my phone when it vibrated hours ago. It felt like someone had rubbed sand in my eyes, and my neck hurt from being hunched over my laptop.

What had that weird fuck done now?

Although I was curious, I stretched and headed for the bathroom, needing to take a piss before I started dealing with his bullshit. That task was easier said than done, considering my dick was already anticipating what might be waiting for me.

Watching them together always made me wildly jealous, but it got me off so hard I was learning to deal with it. The fact that they were spending so much time together now was worse. Fucking him was one thing, but now the man had insinuated his way into our relationship.

Of all the misguided, horny choices I'd ever made…

I checked the time. It was getting late. Hopefully, this wasn't going to make me so jealous that I would lie awake in bed all night.

It took me three tries and changing my password to get into our shared cloud storage. When I found the right file, the still for it was solid black, with no hint of what it contained.

I carried my laptop to the bedroom and sat propped against my headboard. As the recording began, I narrowed my eyes at the screen, as though I could adjust to the darkness in a room half a world away.

Tarryn was lying in her bed. Asleep? She looked so vulnerable.

Loïc came into the frame and sank down on the far side of her bed, making sure he didn't obstruct my view. He didn't look at the camera, but the angle of his body felt like he was putting on a show for me.

He began to touch her, and a guilty, unreasonable arousal made my cock twitch. She and I had an agreement in place where we were allowed to wake each other up with sex, but this was different. He was deliberately trying not to wake her. I could see the struggle in his expression—the awareness that he was doing something taboo, but he didn't stop. Why wasn't she waking up?

Was she drugged?

Visit https://ebookmass.com today to explore

a vast collection of ebooks across various genres, available in popular formats like PDF, EPUB, and MOBI, fully compatible with all devices. Enjoy a seamless reading experience and effortlessly download high-quality materials in just a few simple steps. Plus, don’t miss out on exciting offers that let you access a wealth of knowledge at the best prices!

Exploring the Variety of Random Documents with Different Content

“It's too much for me, Standish O'Dermot Macnamara—to hear you talk lightly of Innishdermot is too much for the blood of the representative of the ancient race. Don't, my boy, don't.”

“I don't talk lightly of it; when you told me it was gone from us I felt it as deeply as any one could feel it.”

“It's one more wrong added to the grievances of our thrampled counthry,” cried the hereditary monarch of the islands with fervour. “And yet you have never sworn an oath to be revenged. You even tell me that you mean to be in the pay of the nation that has done your family this wrong—that has thrampled The Macnamara into the dust. This is the bitterest stroke of all.”

“I have told you all,” said Standish. “Colonel Gerald was kinder to me than words could express. He is going to England in two months, but only to remain a week, and then he will leave for the Castaway Islands. He has already written to have my appointment as private secretary confirmed, and I shall go at once to have everything ready for his arrival. It's not much I can do, God knows, but what I can do I will for him. I'll work my best.”

“Oh, this is bitter—bitter—to hear a Macnamara talk of work; and just now, too, when the money has come to us.”

“I don't want the money,” said Standish indignantly.

“Ye're right, my son, so far. What signifies fifteen thousand pounds when the feelings of an ancient family are outraged?”

“But I can't understand how those men had power to take the land, if you did not wish to give it to them, for their railway and their hotel.”

“It's more of the oppression, my son—more of the thrampling of our counthry into the dust. I rejected their offers with scorn at first; but I found out that they could get power from the oppressors of our counthry to buy every foot of the ground at the price put on it by a man they call an arbithrator—so between thraitors and arbithrators I knew I couldn't hold out. With tears in my eyes I signed the papers, and now all the land from the mouth of Suangorm to Innishdermot is in the hands of the English company—

all but the castle—thank God they couldn't wrest that from me. If you'd only been by me, Standish, I would have held out against them all; but think of the desolate old man sitting amongst the ruins of his home and the tyrants with the gold—I could do nothing."

"And then you came out here. Well, father, I'm glad to see you, and Colonel Gerald will be so too, and—Daireen."

"Aye," said The Macnamara. "Daireen is here too. And have you been talking to the lovely daughter of the Geralds, my boy? Have you been confessing all you confessed to me, on that bright day at Innishdermot? Have you——"

"Look here, father," said Standish sternly; "you must never allude to anything that you forced me to say then. It was a dream of mine, and now it is past."

"You can hold your head higher than that now, my boy," said The Macnamara proudly. "You're not a beggar now, Standish; money's in the family."

"As if money could make any difference," said Standish.

"It makes all the difference in the world, my boy," said The Macnamara; but suddenly recollecting his principles, he added, "That is, to some people; but a Macnamara without a penny might aspire to the hand of the noblest in the land. Oh, here she comes—the bright snowdhrop of Glenmara—the arbutus-berry of Craig-Innish; and her father too—oh, why did he turn to the Saxons?"

The Macnamara, Prince of Innishdermot, Chief of the Islands and Lakes, and King of all Munster, was standing with his son in the coffee-room of the hotel, having just come ashore from the steamer that had brought him out to the Cape. The patriot had actually left his land for the first time in his life, and had proceeded to the colony in search of his son, and he found his son waiting for him at the dock gates.

That first letter which Standish received from his father had indeed been very piteous, and if the young man had not been so resolute in his determination to work, he would have returned to Innishdermot once more, to comfort his father in his trials. But the

next mail brought a second communication from The Macnamara to say that he could endure no longer the desolation of the lonely hearth of his ancestral castle, but would set out in search of his lost offspring through all the secret places of the earth. Considering that he had posted this letter to the definite address of his offspring, the effect of the vagueness of his expressed resolution was somewhat lessened.

Standish received the letter with dismay, and Colonel Gerald himself felt a little uneasiness at the prospect of having The Macnamara quartered upon him for an uncertain period. He was well aware of the largeness of the ideas of The Macnamara on many matters, and in regard to the question of colonial hospitality he felt that the views of the hereditary prince would be liberal to an inconvenient degree. It was thus with something akin to consternation that he listened to the eloquent letter which Standish read with flushed face and trembling hands.

“We shall be very pleased to see The Macnamara here,” said Colonel Gerald; and Daireen laughed, saying she could not believe that Standish's father would ever bring himself to depart from his kingdom. It was on the next day that Colonel Gerald had an interview of considerable duration with Standish on a matter of business, he said; and when it was over and the young man's qualifications had been judged of, Standish found himself in a position either to accept or decline the office of private secretary to the new governor of the lovely Castaway group. With tears he left the presence of the governor, and went to his room to weep the fulness from his mind and to make a number of firm resolutions as to his future of hard work; and that very evening Colonel Gerald had written to the Colonial Office nominating Standish to the appointment; so that the matter was considered settled, and Standish felt that he did not fear to face his father.

But when Standish had met The Macnamara on the arrival of the mail steamer a week after he had received that letter stating his intentions, the young man learned, what apparently could not be included in a letter without proving harassing to its eloquence, that

the extensive lands along the coastway of the lough had been sold to an English company of speculators who had come to the conclusion that a railway made through the picturesque district would bring a fortune to every one who might be so fortunate as to have money invested in the undertaking. So a railway was to be made, and a gigantic hotel built to overlook the lough. The shooting and fishing rights—in fact every right and every foot of ground, had been sold for a large sum to the company by The Macnamara. And though Standish had at first felt the news as a great blow to him, he subsequently became reconciled to it, for his father's appearance at the Cape with several thousand pounds was infinitely more pleasing to him than if the representative of The Macnamaras had come in his former condition, which was simply one of borrowing powers.

"It's the snowdhrop of Glenmara," said The Macnamara, kissing the hand of Daireen as he met her at the door of the room. "And you, George, my boy," he continued, turning to her father; "I may shake hands with you as a friend, without the action being turned to mean that I forgive the threatment my counthry has received from the nation whose pay you are still in. Yes, only as a friend I shake hands with you, George."

"That is a sufficient ground for me, Macnamara," said the colonel. "We won't go into the other matters just now."

"I cannot believe that this is Cape Town," said Daireen. "Just think of our meeting here to-day. Oh, if we could only have a glimpse of the dear old Slieve Docas!"

"Why shouldn't you see it, white dove?" said The Macnamara in Irish to the girl, whose face brightened at the sound of the tongue that brought back so many pleasant recollections to her. "Why shouldn't you?" he continued, taking from one of the boxes of his luggage an immense bunch of purple heather in gorgeous bloom. "I gathered it for you from the slope of the mountain. It brings you the scent of the finest hill in the world."

The girl caught the magnificent bloom in both her hands and put her face down to it. As the first breath of the hill she loved came to

her in this strange land they saw her face lighten. Then she turned away and buried her head in the scents of the hills—in the memories of the mountains and the lakes, while The Macnamara spoke on in the musical tongue that lived in her mind associated with all the things of the land she loved.

"And Innishdermot," said Colonel Gerald at length, "how is the seat of our kings?"

"Alas, my counthry! thrampled on—bethrayed—crushed to the ground!" said The Macnamara. "You won't believe it, George—no, you won't. They have spoiled me of all I possessed—they have driven me out of the counthry that my sires ruled when the oppressors were walking about in the skins of wild beasts. Yes, George, Innishdermot is taken from me and I've no place to shelter me."

Colonel Gerald began to look grave and to feel much graver even than he looked. The Macnamara shelterless was certainly a subject for serious consideration.

"Yes," said Standish, observing the expression on his face, "you would wonder how any company could find it profitable to pay fifteen thousand pounds for the piece of land. That is what the new railway people paid my father."

Once more the colonel's face brightened, but The Macnamara stood up proudly, saying:

"Pounds! What are pounds to the feelings of a true patriot? What can money do to heal the wrongs of a race?"

"Nothing," said the colonel; "nothing whatever. But we must hasten out to our cottage. I'll get a coolie to take your luggage to the railway station. We shall drive out. My dear Dolly, come down from yonder mountain height where you have gone on wings of heather. I'll take out the bouquet for you."

"No," said Daireen. "I'll not let any one carry it for me."

And they all went out of the hotel to the carriage.

The *maître d'hôtel*, who had been listening to the speech of The Macnamara in wonder, and had been finally mystified by the Celtic language, hastened to the visitors' book in which The Macnamara had written his name; but this last step certainly did not tend to make everything clear, for in the book was written:

"Macnamara, Prince of the Isles, Chief of Innish-dermot and the Lakes, and King of Munster."

"And with such a nose!" said the *maître d'hôtel*.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Tis sweet and commendable in your nature,
To give these... duties to your father.

In that and all things we show our duty.

King. What wouldst thou beg, Laertes?
What wouldst thou have?

Laertes. Your leave and favour to ret urn—*Hamlet*.

TO these four exiles from Erin sitting out on the stoep of the Dutch cottage after dinner very sweet it was to dream of fatherland. The soft light through which the broad-leaved, motionless plants glimmered was, of course, not to be compared with the long dwindling twilights that were wont to overhang the slopes of Lough Suangorm; and that mighty peak which towered above them, flanked by the long ridge of Table Mountain, was a poor thing in the eyes of those who had witnessed the glories of the heather-swathed Slieve Docas.

The cries ot the bullock wagoners, which were faintly heard from the road, did not interfere with the musings of any of the party, nor with the harangue of The Macnamara.

Very pleasant it was to hear The Macnamara talk about his homeless condition as attributable to the long course of oppression persisted in by the Saxon Monarchy—at least so Colonel Gerald thought, for in a distant colony a harangue on the subject of British

tyranny in Ireland does not sound very vigorous, any more than does a burning revolutionary ode when read a century or so after the revolution has taken place.

But poor Standish, who had spent a good many years of his life breathing in of the atmosphere of harangue, began to feel impatient at his sire's eloquence. Standish knew very well that his father had made a hard bargain with the railway and hotel company that had bought the land; nay, he even went so far as to conjecture that the affectionate yearning which had caused The Macnamara to come out to the colony in search of his son might be more plainly defined as an impulse of prudence to escape from certain of his creditors before they could hear of his having received a large sum of money. Standish wondered how Colonel Gerald could listen to all that his father was saying when he could not help being conscious of the nonsense of it all, for the young man was not aware of the pleasant memories of his youth that were coming back to the colonel under the influence of The Macnamara's speech.

The next day, however, Standish had a conversation of considerable length with his father, and The Macnamara found that he had made rapid progress in his knowledge of the world since he had left his secluded home. In the face of his father he insisted on his father's promising to remove from the Dutch cottage at the end of a few days. The Macnamara's notions of hospitality were very large, and he could not see why Colonel Gerald should have the least feeling except of happiness in entertaining a shelterless monarch; but Standish was firm, and Colonel Gerald did not resist so stoutly as The Macnamara felt he should have done; so that at the end of the week Daireen and her father were left alone for the first time since they had come together at the Cape.

They found it very agreeable to be able to sit together and ride together and talk without reserve. Standish Macnamara was, beyond doubt, very good company, and his father was even more inclined to be sociable, but no one disputed the wisdom of the young man's conduct in curtailing his visit and his father's to the Dutch cottage. The Macnamara had his pockets filled with money, and as Standish

knew that this was a strange experience for him, he resolved that the weight of responsibility which the preservation of so large a sum was bound to entail, should be reduced; so he took a cottage at Rondebosch for his father and himself, and even went the length of buying a horse. The lordliness of the ideas of the young man who had only had a few months' experience of the world greatly impressed his father, and he paid for everything without a murmur.

Standish had, at the intervals of his father's impassioned discourses, many a long and solitary ride and many a lengthened reverie amongst the pines that grow beside The Flats. The resolutions he made as to his life at the Castaway group were very numerous, and the visions that floated before his eyes were altogether very agreeable. He was beginning to feel that he had accomplished a good deal of that ennobling hard work in the world which he had resolved to set about fulfilling. His previous resolutions had not been made carelessly: he had grappled with adverse Fate, he felt, and was he not getting the better of this contrary power?

But not many days after the arrival of The Macnamara another personage of importance made his appearance in Cape Town. The Bishop of the Calapash Islands and Metropolitan of the Salamander Archipelago had at last found a vessel to convey him to where his dutiful son was waiting for him.

The prelate felt that he had every reason to congratulate himself upon the opportuneness of his arrival, for Mr. Glaston assured his father, after the exuberance of their meeting had passed away, that if the vessel had not appeared within the course of another week, he would have been compelled to defer the gratification of his filial desires for another year.

“A colony is endurable for a week,” said Mr. Glaston; “it is wearisome at the end of a fortnight; but a month spent with colonists has got a demoralising effect that years perhaps may fail to obliterate.”

The bishop felt that indeed he had every reason to be thankful that unfavourable winds had not prolonged the voyage of his vessel.

Mrs. Crawford was, naturally enough, one of the first persons at the Cape to visit the bishop, for she had known him years before—she had indeed known most Colonial celebrities in her time—and she took the opportunity to explain to him that Colonel Gerald had been counting the moments until the arrival of the vessel from the Salamanders, so great was his anxiety to meet with the Metropolitan of that interesting archipelago, with whom he had been acquainted a good many years before. This was very gratifying to the bishop, who liked to be remembered by his friends; he had an idea that even the bishop of a distant colony runs a chance of being forgotten in the world unless he has written an heretical book, so he was glad when, a few days after his arrival at Cape Town, he received a visit from Colonel Gerald and an invitation to dinner.

This was very pleasing to Mrs. Crawford, for, of course, Algernon Glaston was included in the invitation, and she contrived without any difficulty that he should be seated by the side of Miss Gerald. Her skill was amply rewarded, she felt, when she observed Mr. Glaston and Daireen engaged in what sounded like a discussion on the musical landscapes of Liszt; to be engaged—even on a discussion of so subtle a nature—was something, Mrs. Crawford thought.

In the course of this evening, she herself, while the bishop was smiling upon Daireen in a way that had gained the hearts, if not the souls, of the Salamanderians, got by the side of Mr. Glaston, intent upon following up the advantage the occasion offered.

"I am so glad that the bishop has taken a fancy to Daireen," she said. "Daireen is a dear good girl—is she not?"

Mr. Glaston raised his eyebrows and touched the extreme point of his moustache before he answered a question so pronounced. "Ah, she is—improving," he said slowly. "If she leaves this place at once she may improve still."

"She wants some one to be near her capable of moulding her tastes—don't you think?"

"She *needs* such a one. I should not like to say *wants,*" remarked Mr. Glaston.

“I am sure Daireen would be very willing to learn, Mr. Glaston; she believes in you, I know,” said Mrs. Crawford, who was proceeding on an assumption of the broad principles she had laid down to Daireen regarding the effect of flattery upon the race. But her words did not touch Mr. Glaston deeply: he was accustomed to be believed in by girls.

“She has taste—some taste,” he replied, though the concession was not forced from him by Mrs. Crawford's revelation to him. “Yes; but of what value is taste unless it is educated upon the true principles of Art?”

“Ah, what indeed?”

“Miss Gerald's taste is as yet only approaching the right tracks of culture. One shudders, anticipating the effect another month of life in such a place as this may have upon her. For my own part, I do not suppose that I shall be myself again for at least a year after I return. I feel my taste utterly demoralised through the two months of my stay here; and I explained to my father that it will be necessary for him to resign his see if he wishes to have me near him at all. It is quite impossible for me to come out here again. The three months' absence from England that my visit entails is ruinous to me.”

“I have always thought of your self-sacrifice as an example of true filial duty, Mr. Glaston. I know that Daireen thinks so as well.”

But Mr. Glaston did not seem particularly anxious to talk of Daireen.

“Yes; my father must resign his see,” he continued.

“The month I have just passed has left too terrible recollections behind it to allow of my running a chance of its being repeated. The only person I met in the colony who was not hopelessly astray was that Miss Vincent.”

“Oh!” cried Mrs. Crawford, almost shocked. “Oh, Mr. Glaston! you surely do not mean that! Good gracious!—Lottie Vincent!”

“Miss Vincent was the only one who, I found, had any correct idea of Art; and yet, you see, how she turned out.”

“Turned out? I should think so indeed. Lottie Vincent was always turning out since the first time I met her.”

“Yes; the idea of her acting in company of such a man as this Markham—a man who had no hesitation in going to view a picture by candlelight—it is too distressing.”

“My dear Mr. Glaston, I think they will get on very well together. You do not know Lottie Vincent as I know her. She has behaved with the most shocking ingratitude towards me. But we are parted now, and I shall take good care she does not impose upon me again.”

“It scarcely matters how one's social life is conducted if one's artistic life is correct,” said Mr. Glaston.

At this assertion, which she should have known to be one of the articles of Mr. Glaston's creed, Mrs. Crawford gave a little start. She thought it better, however, not to question its soundness. As a matter of fact, the bishop himself, if he had heard his son enunciate such a precept, would not have questioned its soundness; for Mr. Glaston spake as one having authority, and most people whose robustness was not altogether mental, believed his Gospel of Art.

“No doubt what you say is—ah—very true,” said Mrs. Crawford. “But I do wish, Mr. Glaston, that you could find time to talk frequently to Daireen on these subjects. I should be so sorry if the dear child's ideas were allowed to run wild. Your influence might work wonders with her. There is no one here now who can interfere with you.”

“Interfere with me, Mrs. Crawford?”

“I mean, you know, that Mr. Harwood, with his meretricious cleverness, might possibly—ah—well, you know how easily girls are led.”

“If there would be a possibility of Miss Gerald's being influenced in a single point by such a man as that Mr. Harwood, I fear not much can be hoped for her,” said Mr. Glaston.

“We should never be without hope,” said Mrs. Crawford. “For my own part, I hope a great deal—a very great deal—from your

influence over Daireen; and I am exceedingly happy that the bishop seems so pleased with her.”

The good bishop was indeed distributing his benedictory smiles freely, and Daireen came in for a share of his favours. Her father wondered at the prodigality of the churchman's smiles; for as a chaplain he was not wont to be anything but grave. The colonel did not reflect that while smiling may be a grievous fault in a chaplain, it can never be anything but ornamental to a bishop.

A few days afterwards Mrs. Crawford called upon the bishop, and had an interesting conversation with him on the subject of his son's future—a question to which of late the bishop himself had given a good deal of thought; for in the course of his official investigations on the question of human existence he had been led to believe that the duration of life has at all times been uncertain; he had more than once communicated this fact to dusky congregations, and by reducing the application of the painful truth, he had come to feel that the life of even a throned bishop is not exempt from the fatalities of mankind.

As the bishop's son was accustomed to spend half of the revenues of his father's see, his father was beginning to have an anxiety about the future of the young man; for he did not think that his successor to the prelacy of the Calapash Islands would allow Mr. Glaston to draw, as usual, upon the income accruing to the office. The bishop was not so utterly unworldly in his notions but that he knew there exist other means of amassing wealth than by writing verses in a pamphlet-magazine, or even composing delicate impromptus in minor keys for one's own hearing, His son had not felt it necessary to occupy his mind with any profession, so that his future was somewhat difficult to foresee with any degree of clearness.

Mrs. Crawford, however, spoke many comforting words to the bishop regarding a provision for his son's future. Daireen Gerald, she assured him, besides being one of the most charming girls in the world, was the only child of her father, and her father's estates in the South of Ireland were extensive and profitable.

When Mrs. Crawford left him, the bishop felt glad that he had smiled so frequently upon Miss Gerald. He had heard that no kindly smile was bestowed in vain, but the truth of the sentiment had never before so forced itself upon his mind. He smiled again in recollection of his previous smiles. He felt that indeed Miss Gerald was a charming girl, and Mrs. Crawford was most certainly a wonderful woman; and it can scarcely be doubted that the result of the bishop's reflections proved the possession on his part of powerful mental resources, enabling him to arrive at subtle conclusions on questions of perplexity.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Too much of water had'st thou, poor Ophelia.

How can that be unless she drowned herself?

If the man go to this water... it is, will he, nill he, he goes; mark you that.—*Hamlet*.

STANDISH Macnamara had ridden to the Dutch cottage, but he found it deserted. Colonel Gerald, one of the servants informed him, had early in the day driven to Simon's Town, and had taken Miss Gerald with him, but they would both return in the evening. Sadly the young man turned away, and it is to be feared that his horse had a hard time of it upon The Flats. The waste of sand was congenial with his mood, and so was the rapid motion.

But while he was riding about in an aimless way, Daireen and her father were driving along the lovely road that runs at the base of the low hills which form a mighty causeway across the isthmus between Table Bay and Simon's Bay. Colonel Gerald had received a message that the man-of-war which had been stationed at the chief of the Castaway group had called at Simon's Bay; he was anxious to know how the provisional government was progressing under the commodore of those waters whose green monotony is broken by the gentle cliff's of the Castaways, and Daireen had been allowed to accompany her father to the naval station.

The summer had not yet advanced sufficiently far to make tawny the dark green coarse herbage of the hillside, and the mass of rich

colouring lent by the heaths and the prickly-pear hedges made Daireen almost jealous for the glories of the slopes of Glenmara. For some distance over the road the boughs of Australian oaks in heavy foilage were leaning; but when Constantia and its evenly set vineyards were passed some distance, Daireen heard the sound of breaking waves, and in an instant afterwards the road bore them down to the water's edge at Kalk Bay, a little rocky crescent enclosing green sparkling waves. Upon a pebbly beach a few fishing-boats were drawn up, and the outlying spaces were covered with drying nets, the flavour of which was much preferable to that of the drying fish that were near.

On still the road went until it lost itself upon the mighty beaches of False Bay. Down to the very brink of the great green waves that burst in white foam and clouds of mist upon the sand the team of the wagonette was driven, and on along the snowy curve for miles until Simon's Bay with its cliffs were reached, and the horses were pulled up at the hotel in the single street of Simon's Town at the base of the low ridge of the purple hill.

"You will not be lonely, Dolly," said Colonel Gerald as he left the hotel after lunch to meet the commander of the man-of-war of which the yellow-painted hull and long streaming pennon could be seen from the window, opposite the fort at the farthest arm of the bay.

"Lonely?" said the girl. "I hope I may, for I feel I would like a little loneliness for a change. I have not been lonely since I was at Glenmara listening to Murrough O'Brian playing a dirge. Run away now, papa, and you can tell me when we are driving home what the Castaways are really like."

"I'll make particular inquiries as to the possibilities of lawn-tennis," said her father, as he went down the steps to the red street.

Daireen saw a sergeant's party of soldiers carry arms to the colonel, though he wore no uniform and had not been at this place for years; but even less accustomed observers than the men would have known that he was a soldier. Tall, straight, and with bright gray

eyes somewhat hollower than they had been twenty years before, he looked a soldier in every point—one who had served well and who had yet many years of service before him.

How noble he looked, Daireen thought, as he kissed his hand up to her. And then she thought how truly great his life had been. Instead of coming home after his time of service had expired, he had continued at his post in India, unflinching beneath the glare of the sun overhead or from the scorching of the plain underfoot; and here he was now, not going home to rest for the remainder of his life, but ready to face an arduous duty on behalf of his country. She knew that he had been striving through all these years to forget in the work he was accomplishing the one grief of his life. She had often seen him gazing at her face, and she knew why he had sighed as he turned away.

She had not meant to feel lonely in her father's absence, but her thoughts somehow were not of that companionable kind which, coming to one when alone, prevent one's feeling lonely.

She picked up the visitors' book and read all the remarks that had been written in English for the past years; but even the literature of an hotel visitor's book fails at some moments to relieve a reader's mind. She turned over the other volumes, one of which was the Commercial Code of Signals, and the other a Dutch dictionary. She read one of Mr. Harwood's letters in a back number of the *Dominant Trumpeter*, and she found that she could easily recall the circumstances under which, in various conversations, he had spoken to her every word of that column and a quarter. She wondered if special correspondents write out every night all the remarks that they have heard during the day. But even the attempt to solve this problem did not make her feel brisk.

What was the thought which was hovering about her, and which she was trying to avoid by all the means in her power? She could not have defined it. The boundaries of that thought were too vague to be outlined by words.

She glanced out of the window for a while, and then walked to the door and looked over the iron balcony at the head of the steps. Only a few people were about the street. Gazing out seawards, she saw a signal flying from the peak of the man-of-war, and in a few minutes she saw a boat put off and row steadily for the shore near the far-off fort at the headland. She knew the boat was to convey her father aboard the vessel. She stood there watching it until it had landed and was on its way back with her father in the stern.

Then she went along the road until she had left the limits of the town, and was standing between the hill and the sea. Very lovely the sea looked from where it was breaking about the rocks beneath her, out to the horizon which was undefined in the delicate mist that rose from the waters.

She stood for a long time tasting of the freshness of the breeze. She could see the man-of-war's boat making its way through the waves until it at last reached the ship, and then she seemed to have lost the object of her thoughts. She turned off the road and got upon the sloping beach along which she walked some distance.

She had met no one since she had left the hotel, and the coast of the Bay round to the farthest headland seemed deserted; but somehow her mood of loneliness had gone from her as she stood at the brink of those waters whose music was as the sound of a song of home heard in a strange land. What was there to hinder her from thinking that she was standing at the uttermost headland of Lough Suangorm, looking out once more upon the Atlantic?

She crossed a sandy hollow and got upon a ledge of rocks, up to which the sea was beating. Here she seated herself, and sent her eyes out seawards to where the war-ship was lying, and then that thought which had been near her all the day came upon her. It was not of the Irish shore that the glad waters were laving. It was only of some words that had been spoken to her. “For a month we will think of each other,” were the words, and she reflected that now this month had passed. The month that she had promised to think of him had gone, but it had not taken with it her thoughts of the man who had uttered those words.

She looked out dreamily across the green waves, wondering if he had returned. Surely he would not let a day pass without coming to her side to ask her if she had thought of him during the month. And what answer would she give him? She smiled.

"Love, my love," she said, "when have I ceased to think of you? When shall I cease to think of you?"

The tears forced themselves into her eyes with the pure intensity of her passion. She sat there dreaming her dreams and thinking her thoughts until she seemed only to hear the sound of the waters of the distance; the sound of the breaking waves seemed to have passed away. It was this sudden consciousness that caused her to awake from her reverie. She turned and saw that the waves were breaking on the beach *behind her*—the rock where she was sitting was surrounded with water, and every plunge of the advancing tide sent a swirl of water through the gulf that separated the rocks from the beach.

In an instant she had started to her feet. She saw the death that was about her. She looked to the rock where she was standing. The highest, ledge contained a barnacle. She knew it was below the line of high water, and now not more than a couple of feet of the ledge were uncovered. A little cry of horror burst from her, and at the same instant the boom of a gun came across the water from the man-of-war; she looked and saw that the boat was on its way to the shore again. In another half-minute a second report sounded, and she knew that they were firing a salute to her father. They were doing this while his daughter was gazing at death in the face.

Could they see her from the boat? It seemed miles away, but she took off her white jacket and standing up waved it. Not the least sign was made from the boat. The report of the guns echoed along the shore mingling with her cries. But a sign was given from the water: a wave flung its spray clear over the rock. She knew what it meant.

She saw in a moment what chance she had of escape. The water between the rock and the shore was not yet very deep. If she could

bear the brunt of the wild rush of the waves that swept into the hollow she could make her way ashore.

In an instant she had stepped down to the water, still holding on by the rocks. A moment of stillness came and she rushed through the waves, but that sand—it sank beneath her first step, and she fell backwards, then came another swirl of eddying waves that plunged through the gulf and swept her away with their force, out past the rock she had been on. One cry she gave as she felt herself lost.

The boom of the saluting gun doing honour to her father was the sound she heard as the cruel foam flashed into her face.

But at her cry there started up from behind a rock far ashore the figure of a man. He looked about him in a bewildered way. Then he made a rush for the beach, seeing the toy the waves were heaving about. He plunged in up to his waist.

"Damn the sand!" he cried, as he felt it yield. He bent himself against the current and took advantage of every relapse of the tide to rush a few steps onward. He caught the rock and swung himself round to the seaward side. Then he waited until the next wave brought that helpless form near him. He did not leave his hold of the rock, but before the backward sweep came he clutched the girl's dress. Then came a struggle between man and wave. The man conquered. He had the girl on one of his arms, and had placed her upon the rock for an instant. Then he swung himself to the shoreward side, caught her up again, and stumbling, and sinking, and battling with the current, he at last gained a sound footing.

Daireen was exhausted but not insensible. She sat upon the dry sand where the man had placed her, and she drew back the wet hair from her face. Then she saw the man stand by the edge of the water and shake his fist at it.

"It's not the first time I've licked you singlehanded," he said, "and it'll not be the last. Your bullying roar won't wash here." Then he seemed to catch sight of something on the top of a wave. "Hang me if you'll get even her hat," he said, and once more he plunged in. The hat was farther out than the girl had been, and he had more

trouble in securing it. Daireen saw that his head was covered more than once, and she was in great distress. At last, however, he struggled to the beach with the hat in his hand. It was very terrible to the girl to see him turn, squeezing the water from his hair, and curse the sea and all that pertained to it.

Suddenly, however, he looked round and walked up to where she was now standing. He handed her the hat as though he had just picked it up from the sand. Then he looked at her.

"Miss," he said, "I believe I'm the politest man in this infernal colony; if I was rude to you just now I ask your pardon. I'm afraid I pulled you about."

"You saved me from drowning," said Daireen. "If you had not come to me I should be dead now."

"I didn't do it for your sake," said the man. "I did it because that's my enemy"—he pointed to the sea—"and I wouldn't lose a chance of having a shy at him. It's my impression he's only second best this time again. Never mind. How do you feel, miss?"

"Only a little tired," said Daireen. "I don't think I could walk back to the hotel."

"You won't need," said the man. "Here comes a Cape cart and two ancient swells in it. If they don't give you a seat, I'll smash the whole contrivance."

"Oh!" cried Daireen joyfully; "it is papa—papa himself."

"Not the party with the brass buttons?" said the man. "All right, I'll hail them."

Colonel Gerald sprang from the Cape cart in which he was driving with the commodore of the naval station.

"Good God, Daireen, what does this mean?" he cried, looking from the girl to the man beside her.

But Daireen, regardless of her dripping condition, threw herself into his arms, and the stranger turned away whistling. He reached the road and shook his head confidentially at the commodore, who was standing beside the Cape cart.

“Touching thing to be a father, eh, Admiral?” he said.

“Stop, sir,” said the commodore. “You must wait till this is explained.”

“Must I?” said the man. “Who is there here that will keep me?”

“What can I say to you, sir?” cried Colonel Gerald, coming up and holding out his hand to the stranger. “I have no words to thank you.”

“Well, as to that, General,” said the man, “it seems to me the less that's said the better. Take my advice and get the lady something to drink—anything that teetotallers won't allow is safe to be wholesome.”

“Come to my house,” said the commodore. “Miss Gerald will find everything there.”

“You bet you'll find something in the spirituous way at the admiral's quarters, miss,” remarked the stranger, as Daireen was helped into the vehicle. “No, thank you, General, I'll walk to the hotel where I put up.”

“Pray let me call upon you before I leave,” said Colonel Gerald.

“Delighted to see you, General; if you come within the next two hours, I'll slip the tinsel off a bottle of Moët with you. Now, don't wait here. If you had got a pearly stream of salt water running down your spine you wouldn't wait; would they, miss? Aw revaw.”

CHAPTER XXXVI.

I shall, first asking your pardon thereunto, recount the occasion of my sudden and more strange return.

O limèd soul, that, struggling to be free,
Art more engaged.

Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be.—*Hamlet.*

QUITE three hours had passed before Colonel Gerald was able to return to the hotel. The stranger was sitting in the coffee-room with a tumbler and a square bottle of cognac in front of him as the colonel entered.

"Ah, General," cried the stranger, "you are come. I was sorry I said two hours, you know, because, firstly, I might have known that at the admiral's quarters the young lady would get as many doses as would make her fancy something was the matter with her; and, secondly, because I didn't think that they would take three hours to dry a suit of tweed like this. You see it, General; this blooming suit is a proof of the low state of morality that exists in this colony. The man I bought it from took an oath that it wouldn't shrink, and yet, just look at it. It's a wicked world this we live in, General. I went to bed while the suit was being dried, and I believe they kept the fire low so that they may charge me with the bed. And how is the young lady?"

“I am happy to say that she has quite recovered from the effects of her exhaustion and her wetting,” said Colonel Gerald. “Had you not been near, and had you not had that brave heart you showed, my daughter would have been lost. But I need not say anything to you—you know how I feel.”

“We may take it for granted,” said the man.

“Nothing that either of us could say would make it plainer, at any rate. You don't live in this city, General?”

“No, I live near Cape Town, where I am now returning with my daughter,” said Colonel Gerald.

“That's queer,” said the man. “Here am I too not living here and just waiting to get the post-cart to bring me to Cape Town.”

“I need scarcely say that I should be delighted if you would accept a seat with me,” remarked the colonel.

“Don't say that if there's not a seat to spare, General.”

“But, my dear sir, we have two seats to spare. Can I tell my man to put your portmanteau in?”

“Yes, if he can find it,” laughed the stranger. “Fact is, General, I haven't any property here except this tweed suit two sizes too small for me now. But these trousers have got pockets, and the pockets hold a good many sovereigns without bursting. I mean to set up a portmanteau in Cape Town. Yes, I'll take a seat with you so far.”

The stranger was scarcely the sort of man Colonel Gerald would have chosen to accompany him under ordinary circumstances, but now he felt towards the rough man who had saved the life of his daughter as he would towards a brother.

The wagonette drove round to the commodore's house for Daireen, and the stranger expressed very frankly the happiness he felt at finding her nothing the worse for her accident.

And indeed she did not seem to have suffered greatly; she was a little paler, and the commodore's people insisted on wrapping her up elaborately.

“It was so very foolish of me,” she said to the stranger, when they had passed out of Simon's Town and were going rapidly along the road to Wynberg. “It was so very foolish indeed to sit down upon that rock and forget all about the tide. I must have been there an hour.”

“Ah, miss,” said the man, “I'll take my oath it wasn't of your pa you were thinking all that time. Ah, these young fellows have a lot to answer for.”

This was not very subtle humour, Colonel Gerald felt; he found himself wishing that his daughter had owed her life to a more refined man; but on the whole he was just as glad that a man of sensitiveness had not been in the place of this coarse stranger upon that beach a few hours before.

“I don't think I am wrong in believing that you have travelled a good deal,” said Colonel Gerald, in some anxiety lest the stranger might pursue his course of humorous banter.

“Travelled?” said the stranger. “Perhaps I have. Yes, sir, I have travelled, not excursionised. I've knocked about God's footstool since I was a boy, and yet it seems to me that I'm only beginning my travels. I've been——”

And the stranger continued telling of where he had been until the oak avenue at Mowbray was reached. He talked very freshly and frankly of every place both in the Northern and Southern hemispheres. The account of his travels was very interesting, though perhaps to the colonel's servant it was the most entertaining.

“I have taken it for granted that you have no engagement in Cape Town,” said Colonel Gerald as he turned the horses down the avenue. “We shall be dining in a short time, and I hope you will join us.”

“I don't want to intrude, General,” said the man. “But I allow that I could dine heartily without going much farther. As for having an appointment in Cape Town—I don't know a single soul in the colony—not a soul, sir—unless—why, hang it all, who's that standing on the walk in front of us?—I'm a liar, General; I do know one man in

the colony; there he stands, for if that isn't Oswin Markham I'll eat him with relish."

"It is indeed Markham," said Colonel Gerald. "And you know him?"

"Know him?" the stranger laughed. "Know him?" Then as the wagonette pulled up beside where Markham was standing in front of the house, the stranger leapt down, saying, as he clapped Oswin on the shoulder, "The General asks me if I know you, old boy; answer for me, will you?"

But Oswin Markham was staring blankly from the man to Daireen and her father.

"You told me you were going to New York," he said at last.

"And so I was when you packed me aboard the *Virginia* brig so neatly at Natal, but the *Virginia* brig put into Simon's Bay and cut her cable one night, leaving me ashore. It's Providence, Oswin—Providence."

Oswin had allowed his hand to be taken by the man, who was the same that had spent the night with him in the hotel at Pietermaritzburg. Then he turned as if from a fit of abstraction, to Daireen and the colonel.

"I beg your pardon a thousand times," he said. "But this meeting with Mr. Despard has quite startled me."

"Mr. Despard," said the colonel, "I must ever look on as one of my best friends, though we met to-day for the first time. I owe him a debt that I can never repay—my daughter's life."

Oswin turned and grasped the hand of the man whom he had called Mr. Despard, before they entered the house together.

Daireen went in just before Markham; they had not yet exchanged a sentence, but when her father and Despard had entered one of the rooms, she turned, saying:

"A month—a month yesterday."

"More," he answered; "it must be more."

The girl laughed low as she went on to her room. But when she found herself apart from every one, she did not laugh. She had her

own preservation from death to reflect upon, but it occupied her mind less than the thought that came to her shaping itself into the words, "He has returned."

The man of whom she was thinking was standing pale and silent in a room where much conversation was floating, for Mr. Harwood had driven out with Markham from Cape Town, and he had a good deal to say on the Zulu question, which was beginning to be no question. The Macnamara had also come to pass the evening with Colonel Gerald, and he was not silent. Oswin watched Despard and the hereditary monarch speaking together, and he saw them shake hands. Harwood was in close conversation with Colonel Gerald, but he was not so utterly absorbed in his subject but that he could notice how Markham's eyes were fixed upon the stranger. The terms of a new problem were suggesting themselves to Mr. Harwood.

Then Daireen entered the room, and greeted Mr. Harwood courteously—much too courteously for his heart's desire. He did not feel so happy as he should have done, when she laughed pleasantly and reminded him of her prophecy as to his safe return. He felt as he had done on that morning when he had said good-bye to her: his time had not yet come. But what was delaying that hour he yearned for? She was now standing beside Markham, looking up to his face as she spoke to him. She was not smiling at him. What could these things mean? Harwood asked himself—Lottie Vincent's spiteful remark with reference to Daireen at the lunch that had taken place on the hillside in his absence—Oswin's remark about not being strong enough to leave the associations of Cape Town—this quiet meeting without smiles or any of the conventionalities of ordinary acquaintance—what did all these mean? Mr. Harwood felt that he had at last got before him the terms of a question the working out of which was more interesting to him than any other that could be propounded. And he knew also that this man Despard was an important auxiliary to its satisfactory solution.

"Dove of Glenmara, let me look upon your sweet face again, and say that you are not hurt," cried The Macnamara, taking the girl by both her hands and looking into her face. "Thank God you are left to

be the pride of the old country. We are not here to weep over this new sorrow. What would life be worth to us if anything had happened to the pulse of our hearts? Glenmara would be desolate and Slieve Docas would sit in ashes."

The Macnamara pressed his lips to the girl's forehead as a condescending monarch embraces a favoured subject.

"Bravo, King! you'd make a fortune with that sort of sentiment on the boards; you would, by heavens!" said Mr. Despard with an unmodulated laugh.

The Macnamara seemed to take this testimony as a compliment, for he smiled, though the remark did not appear to strike any one else as being imbued with humour. Harwood looked at the man curiously; but Markham was gazing in another direction without any expression upon his face.

In the course of the evening the Bishop of the Calapash Islands dropped in. His lordship had taken a house in the neighbourhood for so long as he would be remaining in the colony; and since he had had that interview with Mrs. Crawford, his visits to his old friend Colonel Gerald were numerous and unconventional. He, too, smiled upon Dairecn in his very pleasantest manner, and after hearing from the colonel—who felt perhaps that some little explanation of the stranger's presence might be necessary—of Daireen's accident, the bishop spoke a few words to Mr. Despard and shook hands with him —an honour which Mr. Despard sustained without emotion.

In spite of these civilities, however, this evening was unlike any that the colonel's friends had spent at the cottage. The bishop only remained for about an hour, and Harwood and Markham soon afterwards took their departure.

"I'll take a seat with you, Oswin, my boy," said Despard. "We'll be at the same hotel in Cape Town, and we may as well all go together."

And they did all go together.

"Fine fellow, the colonel, isn't he?" remarked Despard, before they had got well out of the avenue. "I called him general on chance

Welcome to our website – the perfect destination for book lovers and knowledge seekers. We believe that every book holds a new world, offering opportunities for learning, discovery, and personal growth. That’s why we are dedicated to bringing you a diverse collection of books, ranging from classic literature and specialized publications to self-development guides and children's books.

More than just a book-buying platform, we strive to be a bridge connecting you with timeless cultural and intellectual values. With an elegant, user-friendly interface and a smart search system, you can quickly find the books that best suit your interests. Additionally, our special promotions and home delivery services help you save time and fully enjoy the joy of reading.

Join us on a journey of knowledge exploration, passion nurturing, and personal growth every day!

ebookmasss.com